

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Striving for Lucky Love (and Becoming the Poetry of God)

Numbers 21.4-9; Ephesians 2.1-10

Russ Dean, March 22, 2009



I was enjoying a cup of coconut flavored soup and a plate of a wonderful curried chicken dish at my favorite Thai restaurant, “Thai Taste” over on East Boulevard. Though it was probably three years ago, a comment that my friend, Murray Ezring, made over that meal almost soured the “gaeng panang,” right out of my mouth – and it still stings my soul: “There is no grace in Judaism.” I cannot get the phrase out of my head. “No Grace.” The rabbi at Charlotte’s Temple Israel has become a good friend of mine, and I value our relationship and Murray’s wisdom and his convictions of faith. Though it may be ironic for a Baptist minister to admit, I have no doubt that I have more commitments of faith in common with Murray, a Conservative Jewish Rabbi, than I share with many Christian pastors – but Murray’s words hurt me because they cut to the quick of that which I hold true about faith and life itself. Grace is the very heart of my understanding of Christian faith. Grace is essential to what it means to be the human beings God is still calling our race to become. Grace.

And the goodness of God’s grace can be found throughout the Jewish scriptures, as well. I hear it in today’s ancient text from the book of Numbers. I’ve told Murray this (though who am I to correct the theology of a well-studied conservative Jew, who speaks and truly knows the Hebrew of his own scriptures!?) After more recent conversations, I have a better understanding of Murray’s comment – which really has more to do with his rejection of a certain view of Christian atonement theology – but he holds to his conviction: “There is no Grace,” (which is no surprise, knowing Murray!) And I hold to mine: Grace is the very heart of God. Such is the

nature of good relationships, built on trust and respect, even when they are developed across the sometimes-most-divisive of lines, of race or ideology or religion.

With all due respect for my friend, of common commitments and contrasting convictions, I want to tell you today that grace is essential to life, and because it is – because it is part of the reality of our existence – it must be an integral part of our theological vocabulary. I haven't talked much in the last few years about my "theology of reality," but I have a conviction that that which we know in life, learned from our experiences and relationships, should become a part of our theological language. And, that every part of our theological lexicon should match, as well as possible, the reality of what we know to be true. Life must give rise to theology. And theology must reflect our experience of life. In other words, in simpler words, I believe in Grace, because I have experienced Grace. And I believe we should call it grace, amazing grace, indeed, because it is a life-saving gift that I cannot earn, no matter how hard I try.

You see, I believe in the salvation of which our scriptures speak, not because the word is in the Bible, but because so many times I have experience it, personally. I believe in salvation because too many times, I have needed it, personally. I have needed to be saved from... from someone with an evil motive... from some event of coincidence or happenstance... from the foolishness of my own ignorance or carelessness. And in those experiences I have been saved, and for no reason that I can justify as deserving. I believe in Grace, and I'm happy to call it Grace. I believe in Salvation, and I'm happy to call it Salvation, for no reason other than that these words represent the real experience of my life. You might even have known such experience in your life!

And if this experience is true in this life, surely the words which refer to it can be spoken of with just as much integrity in representing our life with God. Surely, with what Jesus has

taught us of this God, they are apt defining and describing words for God's activity among us.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

A quick exposition of this important verse of scripture: *For by grace you have been saved through faith*. There are three important words to define. Grace is “undeserved merit.”

Something we receive or experience that we cannot have fully expected or earned. Salvation (and I have come to claim the definition of another pastor as my own) – “becoming in character who we (already) are in relationship.”¹ Salvation is that process, life-long process of displaying through our own living the character, the action, the life that best reflects the relationship we already have as children of God. Faith, as the book of Hebrew says, is *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. So let me paraphrase: For by some undeserved merit we are becoming in character who we (already) are in relationship (to God), through an undying belief, trusting in the things we hope for.

There is nothing you can do to deserved to be loved unconditionally. But you are. (I believe everyone deserves to be loved, with conditions... but that is not the love of God.) There is nothing you can do to deserve being offered measureless forgiveness. But you have been. (I believe everyone deserves a measure of forgiveness... but that is not the forgiveness of God.) There is nothing you can do to deserve bearing the image of the Divine. But you do. I believe that everyone deserves a chance to be the very best they can be... but that is not the creativity of God.”

God does not love... if. *God is love* (1 John 4.7).

God does not forgive... for a time. *So far as the East is from the West* (that is, infinitely)
God has removed our transgressions (Psalm 103.12).

¹ These are the often-quoted words of Charlie Milford. (They were often quoted by Charlie, when he was still alive!)

God does not create... with potential to be God-like. *God said, let us make [humankind in our image... male and female...]* ” (Genesis 1.26).

And the story of Jesus Christ is meant to tell us that the love and the forgiveness and the generosity of God’s goodness, is without bound. *Nothing can separate us...* (Romans 8.38). For God has come among us, and that love will never let us go... even if it has to die to prove it!

Sometimes you need to be saved – you just cannot do it on your own – and whether the metaphor comes in a serpent lifted up in the wilderness (see Numbers 21 and John 3), or the Son of God lifted up on the cross, the spiritual truth of scripture, from the very beginning (Murray!) to the very end – and beyond – is that Grace abounds. Thanks be to God!

It is the kind of Good News that ought to curl our toes and set us free!

But too often it does not.

On May 10, 1996 there were two expeditions of intrepid climbers, foolhardy adventure-seekers, pursuing the top of the world, when the weather shifted. In his riveting account of the calamity that ensued on Mt. Everest that day, Jon Krakauer records moment-by-moment of the preparation, the execution, and the disaster of that quest that left eight people, including some of the world’s best mountaineers, dead, nearly six miles above sea-level. In the file in my office labeled “Grace,” I came across a xerox-ed page from *Into Thin Air* that I copied and filed because it rang true to me, unfortunately, as a spiritual metaphor:

The ratio of misery to pleasure (he says) was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I’d been on... climbing Everest was... about enduring pain... in subjecting ourselves to week after week of... suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace...

I hope you hear the irony. You cannot seek Grace. You cannot strive for Grace, work for Grace, suffer for Grace. Grace is a gift – or it is not Grace! But how many people do you know, whose Everest is God? Who climb every day seeking God’s approval? Who struggle through every dilemma desperate for God’s affirmation? Who pray through every prayer, wracked by the OFTEN unspoken, sometimes unacknowledged labor for God’s acceptance? Many of the Baptist I know who can quote Ephesians 2.8 in their sleep spend every waking hour praying that when they die, they’ll have done enough.

But there is never enough. Never enough to thank your parents for bringing you into this world and giving you a start. never enough to thank a friend for picking you up when you were down or downtrodden. Never enough to thank the stranger on the street corner for pulling you to safety when you tried to step in front of that bus you did not see coming. Never enough to thank Jesus for showing us the way to really live. Never enough to thank God... for Grace.

There is never enough. WE might as well accept the gift – from whomever it comes – and move on in gratitude. And though it is not about earning anything, turning to gratitude, to a life-long attitude of gratitude, is the appropriate response to the Grace which makes the world go around.

And this brings us to the final, and maybe most important verse in today’s text. *For we are what God has made us.* The Greek word is *poiema*. When we live in the gratitude of Grace, we are God’s *poiema* – yes, God’s poem for the world. It is what God wants. It is what we need. A little more poetry. Too many of us Strive for the Grace that Anne Sexton, in her poem, calls “Lucky Love.”² We are Striving for Lucky Love, when we need to relax in the Grace of God, and become the Poetry God is writing on this world.

² Sexton ends her poem, “The rowing endeth,” with these words: “Dearest dealer, / I with my royal straight flush / love you so for your wild card, / that untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha / and lucky love.”

I've never been a "three points and a poem" preacher. But a poem seems an appropriate ending for today's sermon. Don't judge the poet. Just hear the Good News:

Accept that God has made you free
Accept all gifts and God you'll see
Respond with kindness on your face
And you will know the truth of Grace.

May it be so!